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ANNUAL IMPERIAL POETRY COMPETITION

NOTHING proves more clearly that national trait of Japan, which consists of a love of the beautiful, than the fact that the State holds an annual competition of poetry. We have in America occasional literary competitions instituted by individual book publishers, newspapers and magazines. But every year, at the beginning of the year, in Japan, the Imperial Bureau of Poetry holds a poem contest under the auspices of His Majesty the Emperor, when poems from citizens all over the Empire, composed on a specific theme set by the Emperor, are adjudged and recited in the presence of His Majesty and the Imperial Court as well as the most important personages of the nation. This custom of encouraging the composition of poetry goes back to remote times. The typical Japanese poem is a tiny verse of thirty-one syllables, called the *tanka* or *waka*, which requires not only skill in composition but profound familiarity with the lore of the nation. In the eighth and ninth centuries, when *waka* composition was at its height, the practice was confined for the most part to scholars and members of the Imperial Court; but in time it came to be no longer limited to the upper classes. It has always, however, owed much encouragement to the Imperial Court. Various emperors have taken a deep personal interest in the nation's poetical literature. The Emperor Daigo, who reigned from 938 to 930 A.D., commanded se-

lections to be made from the leading poets of the past, and the anthology of masterpieces thus compiled came to be known as the *Kokin-shu*. Since that time successive Emperors have followed the same custom as occasion warranted. The Emperor Murakami in the middle of the tenth century ordered a further anthology to be collected, which was known as the *Go-sen-shu*, and the Emperor Kwazan compiled another under the title *Shui-shu* about the year 986 A.D. Towards the end of the eleventh century the Emperor Shirakawa had the *Go-shui-shu* anthology collected, while the Emperor Tsuchimikado compiled the *Shinkokin-shu* collection. There are in all about twenty-one volumes of anthologies compiled under Imperial auspices, comprising the best that has appeared in verse through the long course of Japanese history. As these anthologies represent the fruit of poetic thought and composition during the reigns of twenty rulers they have been called the *Nijunidai-shu*, or poems of twenty generations.

It is the Imperial custom to issue at the end of each year a theme on which the poems of the new year are to be composed. The contest is open to the whole empire without respect to rank or class. The late Emperor was fond of announcing such themes as *Shatô-no-matsu* (Pines before a Shrine), *Sho-jo-no-tsuru* (Cranes on pines), *Ganjo no-kame* (Turtles on the rocks) and

other subjects of classical flavor. The present Emperor has taken up the subject of poetry with all the zest shown by his predecessor; and the subject announced for the last new year was Shato-no-sugi, or Cryptomerias before a shrine. As this was the first poetry competition held under the auspices of the new Emperor more than usual interest was taken, and more than 20,000 poems are said to have been received by the Bureau.

Among those who send in the best poems are princes, nobles and members of the Imperial family, who by habit and training have been long steeped in Japanese literary lore. In the composition of waka the poet must have a wide command of all the more felicitous and poetic phrases that have been used by the great masters through all the centuries, and be able to make an unerring selection from amongst them in building up his verse.

The poems sent in are received by the officials of the Imperial Bureau of Poetry and gone over thoroughly before the great day of decision arrives. Out of the thousands, probably not more than 200 or less are included in the final list. Out of these some seven or eight are found fit to be read in the Imperial presence on the judgment day and those invariably include efforts by princes and the Imperial family. Those of great merit, for the reading of which time cannot be found on the great day of decision, are reserved for the Emperor to read at leisure, and are then returned to the writers. The official name of the day on which the poems of the new year are read before the Emperor is known as Kyuchu Uta Onkwai Hajime, or the New Year Assem-

bly to hear Poems at the Imperial Palace.

The meeting takes place in the Ho-onoma, commonly known as the Phoenix Hall, because of the golden Phoenixes adorning the beautiful walls; and the date is usually between the 18th and the 22nd of January, according as the Emperor has freedom from state affairs. The Phoenix Hall faces south, opening on an exquisite landscape view banked by aged plum trees, with thick shrubbery in the background. In olden times the ceremony was held in the evening, as the Emperor refused to take time from his regular state routine for it; but now it takes place usually in the forenoon, being postponed in case of necessity.

In order to ensure absence of awkwardness or mistake the officials practice the ceremony beforehand. By seven o'clock on the auspicious morning all the officials assemble in the Budonoma, or Hall of Grapes, and make further preparations. By ten o'clock the Imperial party is ready to begin the ceremony. Then the guests proceed in state to the Phoenix Hall and take the seats previously assigned them. Of the whole number assembled only about seven are permitted actually to see the ceremony itself, for the occasion is one of the most sacred. At the appointed moment His Majesty, accompanied by the Empress and the Imperial Court, appears from a special entrance, and the Emperor proceeds to the Throne and the Empress to the Throne of the Imperial Consort to the left of His Majesty, the Imperial Crown Prince, if present, being seated to the left of the Empress, the company flanked by the Imperial Court. Before

the Emperor is placed a beautiful table, on the right and left of which are the chief officials of the Bureau of Poetry ready to begin the ceremony. On the table lies a handsome tray with the pile of manuscripts containing the poems.

Now one of the officials appointed for that duty rises, advances to the table and turns the pile of manuscripts up side down, and at the same time moves the tray to the left. Then the chief official gives his subordinates the sign to advance; and one of them hands over the sheets bearing the poems, one by one, to the *kôshi*, presenting each poem on the tray. The *kôshi* then recites first the theme of the poem, the author's name and lastly the poem itself, after which it is passed on to the *hassei*, another official, who recites the verse again with the proper intonation for poetry; then the poem is recited by the *kôsho* and the *hassei* together. Thus all the poems are dealt with in succession, beginning with the poem of the authors of lowest rank and ending with those of the highest, which is the Emperor himself, the Imperial poem being recited seven times.

When the time for reciting the Imperial poems is reached, the *kôshi* feigns withdrawal and the *dokushi* or higher official, makes a sign to him to wait. Then the *dokushi* takes up the poem of the Crown Prince and reads it, after which he reads that of the Empress and lastly the Emperor's poem. The ceremony being now over the Imperial Court withdraws through the special entrance to the interior of the Palace, after which the guests pass out reverently, much in the same manner as well-behaved Christians would leave a church. Every one honoured

with permission to be present at the annual poetry party is expected to concentrate his mind on the occasion with all his strength and soul. Poetry is regarded in Japan as of the gods, and devotion to it is a religious act.

Of course it is a most distinguished honour to have one's poem read in the Imperial presence; and those so fortunate as to be thus honoured have their names and poems at once reported to the chief of the Imperial Bureau of Poetry and printed in the "Official Gazette." The remaining poems are disinfected and prepared for inspection by the Emperor.

Admirers of Lafcadio Hearn have gleaned knowledge of the exquisite balance of Japanese poetry from his translations of Japanese lyrics. And although this translation:—

Even while praying together in front of the tablets
ancestral,
Lovers find chance to murmur prayers never meant
for the dead,

is twice as long as the original, it yet suggests that for brevity and concision no English verse form can be compared with the Japanese *tanka* and *haikai* or *hokku*. For the Japanese, as a nation of craftsmen and artists, delight in the quintessential and the infinitesimal, whether in pigment, wood, ivory, or words. Their very cage-birds are not cockatoos or canaries, but fireflies and shrilling grasshoppers; their landscape gardening is a dream in inches, not in ells. Of our greatest poets the Japanese poet reverses the poetical telescope. He delights not in bulk, but in the exquisite and minute. He suggests infinity with one stroke of the brush and the deepest deeps of wisdom, contemplation, piety, and love in a slight, gracious gesture or a sigh.

At its best, then, the hokku enshrines an incredible amount of meaning within the narrowest compass of language. It is a little dab of colour upon a canvas one inch square; a thumb-nail sketch in poetry. Translation, a vain thing in regard to any poetry, is obviously a vanity of vanities in regard to the hokku. It is not merely a question of words—and words are not counters but musical symbols, and saturated with tradition and remote nuances of significance—but also of a habit and an attitude of mind. Such a poetry presupposes a fastidious and sensitive reader. There is magic in it, but a magic that requires a reagent. Lafcadio Hearn himself said that only two or three in any hundred hokku will submit to translation at all.

The clearest of them are like pebbles dropped lightly into the well of consciousness. The echoes call each to each, evoke, fainter and fainter yet, thought and scene and feeling, and die away:—"Perched upon the temple bell, the butterfly sleeps." Some are mere delicate little reflections, simple as "To be forgotten by the beloved is a soul-task harder far than trying not to forget;" or fantastic:—"Perhaps this evening shower is but the spray from the oar of Hikoboshi, rowing his boat in haste." It is possible to enjoy this last without any notion of who Hikoboshi is, or why he rows in haste. But it is only when we are told the whole story

of Tanabata and of their love, and of how only on the seventh night of the seventh month can he cross the Celestial River (the Milky Way) in his boat, or hasten to her on foot over a bridge of birds, and then only if the stream be not in flood—not until then is it possible to realize into what very large flowers these least of poetical buds may expand. But concision and unity are essential to the Japanese lyric, and a simplicity like that of one of the twenty-four Chinese paragons of filial virtue, who at threescore and ten "still used to dress in bright colours and play about upon the floor, in order to delude his old parents of over 90 years of age into thinking they were not so very old after all."

Our nursery rhymes are uncommonly like the Japanese, and such a form as the hokku or the tanka might become acclimatized if only the poet were sure that his tiny sign-post would conduct the wayfarer into the appointed Paradise. Our own lyrics are nose-gays of hokku. "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may; old Time is still a-flying;" "Tears, idle tears; happy autumn fields; days that are no more." But we are accustomed to expansion and reiteration, delight in metre, rhythm and rhyme, and prefer a square meal of verse to a breath of rosemary in words, a patch of moonlight, or a few scattered petals of plum-blossom.